

HANDLOOM INDUSTRY OF NORTH EASTERN REGION OF INDIA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MANIPUR

Dr. Gour Gopal Banik

Associate Professor, Department of Accountancy, Gauhati Commerce College
Guwahati – 781021

Neeta Longjam

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Commerce, Gauhati University, Guwahati - 781014

Abstract: *The North Eastern Region of India is a culturally diverse and enchanting region, nestled amidst picturesque landscapes and lush greenery. The NER is made up of eight States namely Assam, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Sikkim, Nagaland, Tripura and Meghalaya. There are numerous indigenous tribes and settlements in this area. The handloom sector in North Eastern Region has a long history and is vital to the socio-economic life of the indigenous populations living in this region. Each state in the region has its own distinct handloom customs, methods and cultural significance. The handloom sector supports the regions cultural identities and indigenous art forms, in addition to providing a means of livelihood. The study gives a general overview of the handloom sector in the area, highlighting the distinct handloom scenarios of each state with a special focus on the handloom industry of Manipur.*

Keywords: North Eastern Region, Handloom Industry and Manipur

Introduction:

The handloom industry of the North Eastern Region of India holds a special place in the country's textile landscape. This sector not only supports livelihood but also protects and recognises the rich cultural history of the diverse indigenous tribes in the region.

The handloom products of North Eastern Region consist of various traditional patterns, original designs and local weaving methods. The complex diversity of regional cultures, customs and beliefs is reflected in the distinctive handloom heritage of each state in the area. The handloom items from this area have one of the best craftsmanship. Some of the well-known products from NER are the exquisite weaving of Assam's Muga silk to the bright tribal designs of Nagaland and the rich embroidery of Manipur.

This sector provides employment and income opportunities for countless weavers, especially women, who contribute significantly to the economy of the region.

Objective:

The objective of this research is to study the Handloom Industry of North Eastern Region (NER) of India with special focus on the handloom sector of Manipur.

Methodology:

For the study, only secondary data were used. The data were gathered from a variety of government publications, including handloom-related periodicals, bulletins, journals and reports.

North Eastern Region (NER) – A Brief Profile:

The North Eastern Region (NER) is a hidden gem. This picturesque region offers a richness of breathtaking landscapes and diverse cultures. This region shares international border with Myanmar in the east, Bhutan in the north-west, Tibet in the north, Bangladesh in the south-west and Nepal in the west.¹ The North Eastern Region (NER) has a captivating natural resource which includes lush green hills, gushing waterfalls, mesmerizing rivers and dense forest. The Brahmaputra River, Kanchenjunga, the famous Kaziranga National Park, the living root bridges of Meghalaya, the calm serenity of the Tawang Valley in Arunachal Pradesh, the Loktak Lake, the Dzuko Valley, etc. are some of the famous places of North Eastern Region. There are many ethnic groups that make up the North Eastern Region, with each having their own unique customs, dialects and festivals. The indigenous tribes and communities of this region have deeply preserved their traditional beliefs and practices, contributing to the region's unique cultural diversity.

Handloom Industry of NER:

The handloom industry has played a vital role in the cultural and economic growth of the North Eastern Region (NER). The NER, which is well-known for its rich textile heritage, has a vibrant handloom sector that brings together magnificent fabrics, distinctive designs and age-old craftsmanship. The handloom sector in the NER is deeply intertwined with the region's diverse communities and their traditional weaving techniques. Each state in the NER has a unique weaving patterns, themes and techniques that reflect each of the community's culture and tradition.

The Handloom Industry provides employment opportunities to a significant number of people, especially women in this area. In addition to providing a means of livelihood, handloom weaving helps to preserve the cultural heritage and pass down traditional skills from one generation to the next.

The weavers of this region mostly use natural fibres and dyes, which is abundantly available due to its varied geographical setup. The area has access to a variety of natural resources like silk, cotton and wool. Natural materials are used in traditional dyeing techniques, such as plant extracts, roots and bark which produce environmentally friendly colours that are in high demand.

Handloom Products of North Eastern Region (NER) given protection under Geographical Indications (GI) Act 1999.

The Geographical Indication Act of 1999, was passed by the Indian government to safeguard goods and products which have a unique quality and distinctive geographical origins. Once a product has been registered in the Geographical Indications Registry, the producer or organisation representing the products is given exclusive right to produce and market the products. This Act helps to preserve the traditional craftsmanship and promote local economies.

¹ Banik, G.G. & Longjam, N. (2023). *Issue of GI Tag to Protect the Indigenous Products with Reference to North Eastern States of India*. Aatamanirbhar Bharat-Vision of Self-Reliant India. 129-141.

Among the eight States of NER, handloom products of only five States have been given GI tag by the Government of India.

The following is a list of Handloom Products of NER given GI Tag:

SI No	State Name	Name of Handloom Products
1.	Arunachal Pradesh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Idu Mishmi Textiles
2.	Assam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gamosa
3.	Manipur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moirangphee • Wangkheiphee • Saphee Lanphee
4.	Mizoram	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pawndum • Ngotekherh • Hmaram • Tawlhlohpaun • Mizo Paunchei
5.	Nagaland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chakshesang Shawl

(Source: Registered Geographical Indications, Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade, Government of India)

The three States which have not been allotted GI Tag on any of their handloom products are Sikkim, Tripura and Meghalaya.

Table 1: A brief Profile of the Handloom Industry of North Eastern Region (NER)

Name of State	No. Of Handlooms	No. of Allied Workers	No. of Weavers
Arunachal Pradesh	99,454	17,016	77,600
Assam	12,48,806	1,76,453	11,07,428
Manipur	2,16,192	12,203	2,12,481
Meghalaya	43,220	1,553	41,221
Mizoram	22,875	10,242	17,298
Nagaland	70,089	7,534	35,950
Sikkim	132	65	632
Tripura	1,66,050	25,712	1,11,927
Total	18,66,818	2,50,778	16,04,537

(Source: 4th All India Handloom Census, 2019-20, Ministry of Textile, GOI)

The State of Assam has the highest position in terms of the Number of Handlooms, allied workers and weavers in the entire NER. Next is the State of Manipur followed by Tripura. It may also be mentioned here that the handloom industry in NER makes up a sizeable portion of India's overall handloom industry. The NER together amounts to 66% in terms of number of handlooms, 29.5% in allied workers, 45.5% in weavers and 76.2% in terms of female weavers of the entire handloom sector of India.

Arunachal Pradesh

The state of Arunachal Pradesh has a wide variety of handwoven textiles, each of which represents a different ethnic group. There are various tribal communities in the State, each with

its own distinctive weaving customs and methods. The weavers still use age-old techniques that have been handed down through generations.

Natural fibres including cotton, wool and silk are the main materials used. These fibres are expertly dyed by the weavers using natural and organic dyes derived from nearby plants, flowers, trees etc. Some of the famous handloom products of the State are the Cotton fabrics made by the Adi tribes, the textiles of Apatani tribes which is famous for their vibrant patterns and designs, the colourful shawls and jackets of the Nyishi tribes, the Idu Mishmi textiles by the Mishmi tribes (GI Tagged) etc.

The textile patterns found among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh such as Adi, Mishmi and Apatani are invariably of geometric pattern. Most popular motives are Zig-Zag lines and angular designs.²

Assam

The handloom industry of Assam makes a sizable economic and cultural contribution to the state. The State has the highest number of handloom worker households i.e., 12,69,506 (40%) of the entire country. In terms of production, the State accounts for a bulk of the shawl production (i.e., 77%) of India.³

The industry is renowned for its fine silk fabrics and sophisticated weaves. The Muga silk, Eri silk and Pat silk which is collectively known as the Assam Silk are famous for their shine and lustre. The Muga silk, sometimes known as 'golden silk' is prized for its organic golden tint and lustrous texture. The Muga Silk has been given GI protection by the Government of India. The main types of yarns used by the weavers are silk, cotton, linen and wool. The dyeing process mainly consist of natural dyes made from locally available resources. Some notable handloom products of the State are Gamosa, Assam silk Sarees, Mekhela, etc.

Meghalaya

The handloom sector of Meghalaya, like most of the NER States, is a female dominated sector. The female weavers in the State accounts for 70 per cent of the total weavers of 41,221.⁴ The handwoven textiles from Meghalaya have distinctive themes and patterns that pay respect to the indigenous tribes' rich folklore, mythology and traditions. Each tribe and community in the State exhibit their ethnic pride and ancestry by wearing the handwoven fabrics.

The eri silk (also known as ryndia silk) is a fabric only found in Meghalaya and is the most commonly used yarn by weavers in the state. The handwoven textiles of Meghalaya are given a distinctive character by the natural fibres. The dyeing is mostly done organically and bamboo floor Looms is the most widely used loom.

Mizoram

The textiles industry in Mizoram forms a significant part of the cultural and economic aspect of the people. Weaving is mostly done by women from an early age. A large variety of handwoven fabrics including traditional clothing, shawls, stoles, blankets, table runners and bags are produced by the talented weavers of the State. There are 17,298 weavers in the State as a whole, with 15,162 women and 2,135 men making up that number. There is only 1

² <https://textilevaluechain.in/in-depth-analysis/articles/traditional-textiles/textiles-of-arunachal-pradesh/>

³ 4th All India Handloom Census, 2019-20, Ministry of Textiles, GOI.

⁴ ibid

transgender weaver in the State.⁵ The district of Thenzawl is often referred to as the Handloom city of the State. This district is famous for producing a wide variety of rich and vibrant textiles. The weavers in the State use a variety of looms and yarns to produce their magnificent handwoven fabrics. The most common loom used by the weavers is the Loin Loom also known as the backstrap loom. Cotton is the most widely used yarn, followed by silk. The Indian government has awarded the GI Tag to five handloom items. They are Pawndum, Ngotekherh, Hmaram, Tawlhlohpaun and Mizo Paunchei. Mizoram has the highest number of GI tagged Handloom products in the entire NER.

Nagaland

Weaving is an integral part of Naga culture and is deeply rooted in the daily life of the locals. The weavers are mostly women who constitute 94 % of the total weavers of the State. The weaving techniques, methods, designs and patterns have been passed down through generations. Every tribe has a unique weaving practice that represent its beliefs, traditions, identity and rituals. The backstrap loom and cotton are the most widely type of loom and yarn used by the weavers.

The unique handwoven fabrics known as 'Naga shawls' represent the cultural identity and artistic brilliance of the Naga tribes. These shawls stand out for their bold colours, elaborate patterns and meaningful motifs. The Angami, Ao, Lotha, and Sumi tribes, are just a few of the Naga tribes that have their own distinctive weaving patterns. The most famous Naga shawl is the Chakshesang Shawl (GI Tagged product), worn by the Chakshesang tribe of Nagaland. Apart from shawls, the State also produces a variety of traditional clothes. The different Naga tribes use different clothing for festivals, cultural events and significant occasions.

Sikkim

The State of Sikkim is mainly inhabited by three different communities namely Bhutias, Nepalese and Lepchas. The handloom sector in the State is predominantly carried out by the Lepchas community, who are skilled in this craft. Clothing, shawls, stoles, bedspreads and ornamental fabrics are just a few of the handwoven textiles that are produced in Sikkim. Each fabric exhibits fine handiwork, colourful hues and motifs that capture Sikkim's distinct cultural history. Traditional designs frequently feature nature like flowers, animals and mountains to represent the close bond between people and their surroundings.

There are 632 total weavers in the State, of which 97 % are female weavers.⁶ Most of the weavers are rural household based, they manage both their domestic duties and their involvement in the handloom industry.

Tripura

Tripura is well-known for its thriving cultural heritage and long history of handloom weaving. A considerable segment of the population is engaged in the weaving sector. This industry helps to preserve the cultural identity of local tribes. The woven clothes frequently feature floral, birds, animal motifs and designs which reflects the state's abundant biodiversity.

The handloom items include scarves with motifs that are unique to the Chakma tribe, as well as riha, lungis, saris, and chaddars of the Kuki, Lussai and Reang tribes. The primary design

⁵ ibid

⁶ ibid

element of Tripuri handlooms is stripes, both vertical and horizontal, with sporadic embroidery in various colours. Its designs have a long history and vary from tribe to tribe.⁷

The weavers primarily use locally sourced natural fibres like cotton and silk. Loin Loom is the main type of Loom used.

HANDLOOM INDUSTRY OF MANIPUR

Manipur is home to breathtaking landscapes, a thriving local community and a rich cultural history. The State is endowed with lush green valleys, tranquil lakes and beautiful highlands. A number of indigenous populations make up the state's diverse population, which adds to its rich variety of traditions and customs. Manipur is also famous for its mesmerizing dance styles, including the famed Ras Leela and Manipuri dance.

The state's handloom sector also exhibits rich cultural heritage through its excellent craftsmanship. The handloom sector in Manipur not only contributes significantly to the cultural fabric of the state but also provides income for many weavers and craftsmen. The weavers have been passing on their weaving expertise to younger generations. The talented weavers portray in their products the folklore, mythology, and natural environment with exquisite designs and patterns.

The handloom goods of Manipur are famous for their superb craftsmanship and fine attention to detail. The weavers use a variety of traditional methods and locally produced cotton and silk fibres. Manipuri textiles are distinguished by its vibrant hues, detailed motifs and distinctive weaving patterns. Some of the well-known products are Moirang Phee, Wangkhei Phee, Saphee Lanphee, Rani Phee, Silk Saree and Leirum Phanek. Among them, Moirang Phee, Wangkhei Phee and Saphee Lanphee are GI Tagged product.

Table 2: Brief Profile of the Handloom Industry of Manipur

SI No	Parameters	Numbers
1	Number of Looms	2,15,397
2	Number of Households	2,21,855
3	Total Number of Weavers	2,12,481
4	Total Number of Allied Workers	12,203
5	Average Number of Working Days in a year	216
6	Total Number of Female weavers	2,04,506
7	Total Number of Male Weaver	7,936
8	Total Number of Transgender Weaver	37
9	Average production of Major Fabrics per weaver per day (Meter)	11.8

(Source: Handloom Census Report, 2019-20, GOI)

The female participation is very high as compared to male participation in the sector. This implies a female dominated sector and most of the marketing is also done by women. Manipur stands third in the number of weaver household in the entire country next only to Assam and West Bengal.

Name of Important schemes for the development of Handloom sector

The following are the names of both Central and State Schemes introduced for the growth and development of the Handloom sector:

⁷ <https://ignca.gov.in/divisionss/janapada-sampada/northeastern-regional-centre/textiles-of-tripura/>

Central Schemes	State Schemes
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Comprehensive Handloom Cluster Development Scheme 2. Handloom Weavers Comprehensive Welfare Scheme 3. National Handloom Development Programme (NHDP) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Loom Upgradation Scheme 2. Handloom and Handicraft Delivery Scheme 3. Yarn Supply Scheme

The government has introduced the above schemes to protect the cultural heritage, create employment, support rural development, revive traditional crafts, promote sustainable practices and to market handloom goods. These schemes assist the weavers and artisans involved while also advancing the overall development and sustainability of the handloom industry.

Conclusion:

The handloom clothes produced in the North Eastern Region are well known and respected both domestically and internationally. Fashion fans and conscious shoppers from all over the world are drawn to these products because of their exquisite weaving, natural fibres and brilliant colours. The expansion of new market prospects brought about by this increasing demand has boosted the local economy. The handloom industry of the North Eastern Region of India is a remarkable sector that deserves recognition, support and preservation. This industry not only contributes to the economic growth of the region but also preserves the traditions, customs and identities of the indigenous communities, making it a vital part of India's rich cultural heritage.

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